

ANALEPTIC SUBLIME: RECUPERATIVE FORCES IN JOEL TYLER HEADLEY'S *ADIRONDACK; OR LIFE IN THE WOODS* (1849)

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The June 1849 edition of the *Democratic Review* opens its review of Joel Tyler Headley's *Adirondack; or Life in the Woods* (1849) with the following observation:

Many of our readers, especially our city readers, will be absolutely startled to hear, that within the heart of the great and populous state of New-York there lies a vast region, extending over more than one hundred miles in every direction, which remains to this day a perfect wilderness, uninhabited by man, although offering many inducements to settlers ("Notices of New Books," 569-571).

Indeed, when Headley published his elaborate, full-length account of his experiences hiking throughout the Adirondack Mountains, relatively few individuals had ever heard of – and even less had dared to traverse – this immense mountain region of New York State. Headley's *Adirondack* is in fact one of the first full-length discussions of the Adirondack Mountains and arguably the most eloquently written of these early texts. As such, when Headley's book was first published in 1849, it drew immediate attention to a vast but little known wilderness expanse of the country. Although by the early-twentieth century the book had fallen into relative obscurity, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, *Adirondack* had an extensive readership, in part because of Headley's unrestrained idealization of and tribute to the analeptic qualities of the Adirondack

CANOE ON A SMALL ISLAND IN THE MIDDLE OF BLUE MOUNTAIN LAKE, AND EARLY MORNING FOG OVER BLUE MOUNTAIN, HAMILTON CO., ADIRONDACK PARK & FOREST PRESERVE, NY

Mountains. Headley's creative interpretation of the Adirondack wilderness thus signifies an awareness that extends beyond the materiality of place – it provides him with a “feeling of freedom” where he can find “health” and a “new spring” (Headley 13).

Adirondack is comprised primarily of letters Headley wrote during two summers he spent travelling throughout various sections of the Adirondack region. He published many of these letters in a variety of New York newspapers between 1844 and 1846, and the interest they garnered inspired him to compile these letters, along with other observations of his Adirondack travels, into one volume. In its review of *Adirondack*, the *Democratic Review* praises Headley's letters as “charming,” and the reviewer notes that they “deserved to be redeemed from their ephemeral demi-notoriety, and graced with the honor of binding” (“Notices,” 570). Headley's “graceful style,” the reviewer maintains, was “admirably adapted to describe the more than Switzerland of our American wilderness.” However, although the *Democratic Review* extols *Adirondack* as a “graphic and pleasing account” of the Adirondack region, “agreeably interspersed with personal narratives and lively incidents” (570), not all contemporary reviews of the book were favorable. The *Southern Quarterly Review*, for instance, found Headley's writing somewhat “overdone,” and too full of “pathos and reflection” (*Southern Quarterly*, 236-238). Similarly, the August 1849 edition of *The Athenæum* asserts, “whatever be the attraction of Mr. Headley's book as regards subject, his style has small charm.” That said, the reviewer later has a change of heart and ultimately commends the book as a “provocative” read and characterizes Headley's descriptions of his journeys to the Adirondack Mountains as “mysterious and exciting” (833-834). Even the *Southern Quarterly Review*'s largely negative assessment of *Adirondack* concedes that readers will find the book “sprightly and amusing.... well printed and illustrated with some very sweet engravings” (238). Hence, despite a handful of lukewarm critical responses, nineteenth-century readers enthusiastically embraced Headley's style and lively descriptions. *Adirondack* was so popular during the second half of the nineteenth century that it was reprinted and then expanded in eight American and two British editions over a period of three decades.¹

ADIRONDACK ALLURE AND THE ROMANTIC IMAGINATION

When Headley first began visiting the Adirondacks in 1844, the country was still recovering from the effects of a decade-long financial crisis that began after the Panic of 1837. By the end of the 1840s, however, the recession was coming to a close, and the nation's economic recovery helped foster a growing fascination with the American wilderness. As Philip G. Terrie notes, “When Headley wrote about a part of America as wild as the Rocky Mountains and practically on his readers' doorsteps, he hit upon a combination sure to appeal to a wide readership” (6). When *Adirondack* was published, the combined forces of a growing middle class, the extraordinary growth of the United States railroad system, and a new sense of prosperity meant more Americans were in a position to take vacations from their jobs. As Hallie E. Bond observes, many city dwellers increasingly began to realize that “urban life was exhausting.... cities were noisy and dirty” (2), and civilization's

luxuries seemed to compromise the cultural traditions of an earlier time. Headley's “effusive appreciation for the Adirondack wilderness,” argues Bond, “typified the tenets of popular American Romanticism” (14) and encouraged individuals to travel away from crowded urban centers and head toward the Adirondack wilderness.

Much like other early nineteenth-century writers who had visited this vast mountain range, Headley understood the importance of the Adirondacks' “unbroken wilderness” (*Adirondack*, v) to the nineteenth-century American imagination and the Romantic era's faith in non-human nature's redemptive attributes. However, in the 1869 enlarged edition of *Adirondack*, Headley includes several new chapters in which he marvels over the changes that had taken place since he first visited the Adirondacks twenty-five years earlier, stating that the “terra incognita” he first encountered years before had been transformed into a major vacation destination with a “steady rush of visitors” (442-443). He also appears somewhat surprised by the number of women who were inclined to indulge in the pleasures of the rugged Adirondack landscape, noting that when he first began his excursions to the Adirondacks, “the idea of a lady visiting it for pleasure never entered the head of any one,” yet now, he observes, “ladies go in crowds” (442).

Scholars and intellectuals also began travelling to the Adirondacks to experience the mountains “savage grandeur, beauty, and sublimity” (Headley, *Adirondack*, 229). An 1858 expedition to Follensby Pond near Raquette Lake was comprised of several well-known literati of the period, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Louis Agassiz, James Russell Lowell, and William James Stillman, an artist, journalist, photographer, and historian who organized the trip after first traveling to the Adirondacks in the summer of 1855. Stillman was, like Headley, an alumnus of Union College, graduating in 1848, a year before the publication of *Adirondack*, so it is not surprising that literary historians Albert J. von Frank and Thomas Wortham suggest that Headley's *Adirondack* likely “influenced” Stillman “in going” to the Adirondacks (Emerson, *Collected Works*, 340).² In truth, *Adirondack* influenced many other writers of the period. As Lawrence Buell acknowledges, Headley was one of four “American precedents” (Buell 328) for Henry David Thoreau's own retreat to, and subsequent writings about, Walden Pond.

“The Philosophers' Camp in the Adirondacks,” one of Stillman's best-known paintings, commemorates the excursion to Follensby Pond,³ and Emerson's poem “The Adirondacks. A Journal. Dedicated to My Fellow-Travelers in August, 1858,”⁴ memorializes their journey:

“Northward[,] the length of Follansbee we rowed,
Under low mountains, whose unbroken ridge
Ponderous with beechen forest sloped the shore” (lines 30-32).

While it seems reasonable that Emerson would consider the Adirondacks the quintessence of raw nature, as Catherine Henshaw Knott points out, Emerson “expressed ambivalence toward wilderness” (58). In fact, this trip was Emerson's first authentic venture into such

an extensive mountainous landscape. Conversely, Headley, in spite of suffering from ill health at the time, embraces the rugged terrain and delights in trekking “[u]p long hills, and down into deep gulfs, with the invisible branches sweeping [his face] at almost every step” (*Adirondack*, 15). He even seems to take pleasure in deriding Emerson’s New England landscape, which from Headley’s perspective hardly compares with the immensity of New York’s Adirondack Mountain range, which is, he informs readers, “about the size of Massachusetts and Connecticut put together.” Unlike the scant 1.3 mile walk from the center of Concord to Walden Pond, visitors who chose to hike into the Adirondacks, Headley explains, must find their way using a compass, “sustained by what skill you can secure.” It is only by entering “the gloomy gorges and savage mountains that everywhere roll into disorder” that one obtains “a faint conception of the Adirondack region” (*Adirondack*, v).

THE RESTORATIVE FORCE OF THE ADIRONDACK MOUNTAINS

Although Headley did not begin his professional life as a writer, he attributed his “love of mountain-climbing and indeed [his] descriptive power” to “the glorious and grand scenery of [his] birthplace” in Walton, NY, a town set in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains and “picturesquely situated in a valley hemmed in by sparkling streams and surrounded by bold mountains” (*Passages*, 211). In the confines of this landscape Headley’s “youthful imagination was kindled and strengthened, and his love for the mountains and forests was born” (“Headley, Hon. Joel Tyler,” 360). It is no wonder, then, that Headley chose to attend Union College, in Schenectady, NY⁵ which is located only a short distance from the Adirondacks. After graduating from Union in 1839, he studied theology at Auburn Seminary and then moved to New York City, where he was ordained as a minister. Although he was offered a position as pastor of a large church in New York City, Headley described his physical health at the time as “miserable” and thus was obliged to accept a position in a much smaller church in Stockbridge, MA. Within two years, however, Headley “broke down completely” (*Passages*, 211), and at the insistence of his physician he travelled throughout Europe for two years. According to Headley in a letter he wrote to literary critic and editor Rufus Griswold, although the trip was intended to repair his health, it actually made his condition “worse than when [he] left home,” and he ultimately decided to give up “all idea of following [his] profession” and instead turned his attention “to literature” (*Passages*, 211).

Headley’s publications include an eclectic assortment of biographies, histories, sketches, and travel narratives. Several of his earlier works – *Letters from Italy* (1845), *The Alps and the Rhine* (1845), and *Sacred Mountains* (1846) – draw from the two years he spent attempting to recuperate in Europe during the early 1840s. On his return to the United States in 1844, Headley experienced a particularly debilitating “attack on the brain,” which was followed by a stern reproach from his “able physician,” who urged him to escape “the din and struggle of [New York City’s] Broadway and Wall Street.” Headley ultimately chose to “seek mental repose and physical strength in the woods” of the Adirondacks (*Adirondack*, 21).

During the nineteenth century, American writers who drew on representations of non-human landscapes often revealed nineteenth-century anxieties over industrialization and rapid urbanization. Integrating social criticism with appeals to leave the modern world behind, these writers frequently encouraged readers to turn toward the natural world as a physically, mentally, and spiritually restorative setting. As Emerson declares in his landmark essay *Nature* (1836): “In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, – no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair” (Emerson, *Collected Works* 8:10). Nature, according to Emerson, has the power to heal our wounded pride, alleviate our misfortunes, and restore our sanity. In *Adirondack* Headley envisions nature as just such a recuperative place, where he will garner spiritual, physical, and cognitive healing. Indeed, Headley experiences nature as “filling the soul with a delight and joy it never before experienced” (195). The natural world, he maintains, should be appreciated for all its intrinsic, recuperative value, arguing “every man degenerates without frequent communion with nature” (168). His journey into the wild Adirondacks removed the “restraints which the thousand eyes and reckless tongues about him fasten[ed] on the heart” (iii). And because the woods empowered him to “cast aside” the “mask that society compels one to wear,” Headley found that his “soul [could] rejoice in its liberty and again become a child in action” (ii-iii).

In *Walden* Henry David Thoreau establishes an approach that is similar to Headley’s own subjective approach to nature, stating that his experiences at Walden are a conscious attempt to “live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, to discover that I had not lived.” By living “deep,” Thoreau resolves to “suck out all the marrow of life” (97). Headley’s purpose in traveling the “pathless woods” (*Adirondack*, 13) of the Adirondack Mountains is, like Thoreau’s, deeply personal. However, his resolve in going into nature is not to extract the essence out of life; rather, it is to live in harmony *with* nature. While Thoreau seeks to drive life “into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms” (88), Headley maintains that he took the “long and steady stretch up the mountain side” (14) to live amongst nature, in order to enhance his life. He proclaims that the lonely woods, “coarse fare,” and extensive landscape of the Adirondacks are “better than all the ‘poppies and mandrigras’ [*sic*] of the world to ‘medicine’ not only the body but the mind” (14). Simply put, for Headley, the collective forces of the Adirondack wilderness are restorative.

That nature possessed the intrinsic power to “soothe, regenerate, and reinvigorate the weary body and soul of modern man” was, according to Philip Terrie, a “common article of the romantic faith” (6). However, it was not until the latter part of the twentieth century that environmental psychologists and sociologists began collecting empirical data that helps support the faith many romantic writers had in the regenerative properties of a predominantly natural setting. Studies in Attention Restoration Theory (ART), a concept developed in the 1980s by environmental psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, help

define the way in which experience with non-human nature can significantly improve one's physical and cognitive abilities. In one of his letters from *Adirondack*, Headley writes, "An over-wrought brain has driven me into these solitudes for rest and quiet – my only companions being my rifle and fishing rod" (20-21). He proceeds to highlight the "contrasts, nay, almost the shocks of feeling one experiences in stepping from the crowded city into the dense forest where his couch is the boughs he himself cuts" (40-45). He reflects on the dream-like state he inhabits in the wilderness, as he considers "[y]esterday...I was walking the crowded streets of New York; last evening, in a birch-bark canoe,... nearly a day's journey from a human habitation, sailing over a lake whose green shores have never been marred by the axe of civilization" (45). In the wilderness, Headley's "soul awakes in this new existence, and casting off the fetters that has bound it, rejoices in broader liberty, and leaps with a new, exultant feeling" (115). Wilderness in solitude, says Headley in a poem he included in *Adirondack*, allows "a still small voice...to come through the wild / (Like a father consoling a fretful child), / ...Saying MAN IS DISTANT BUT GOD IS NEAR" (297). The mountains thus bring the "soul to freer, brighter regions" (115).

Scientists have long been able to document the physiological responses one experiences in natural settings. Neuroimaging studies are able to chart structural changes that occur in several areas of the brain when an individual is exposed to nature, and each of these areas of the brain impacts the way humans store, process, and retain information. For example, the frontal lobe of the brain is associated with attention span, short-term memory, impulse control, and judgment, while the temporal lobe contains the hippocampus, that part of the brain involved with visual and long-term memory, stress regulation, language comprehension, emotions, and construction of meaning. The cingulate cortex is the area of the brain that is associated with emotion and social cognition, and some studies indicate that exposure to the "potentially distracting stimuli" of urban environments can place stress on the anterior cingulate cortex, which may "deplete its limited neural resources" and can lead to an overwrought brain (Watson et. al. 408).

Studies performed on cognitive functioning and the benefits of nature will often employ two interrelated classifications known as *directed attention* and *indirect attention*. First developed by nineteenth-century psychologist and philosopher William James,⁶ these two categories of attention are distinguished by the amount of effort the brain uses depending on whether one's attention is voluntary or involuntary. For instance, *directed attention* engages cognitive-control processes in the frontal and parietal lobes of the brain and occurs when deep concentration must be maintained. This level of concentration often arises in situations that are dull, repetitive, or uninteresting or that require one to block out extraneous stimuli in order to direct concentration toward something that might not be particularly stimulating but that requires intense focus. According to James, *directed attention* occurs when "we resist the attractions of more potent stimuli and keep our mind occupied with some object that is naturally unimpressive" (224). However, *indirect attention* occurs when one is involved

in activities that have a "directly exciting quality" (221); thus, events, objects, and ideas that capture the attention involuntarily, such as what one sees when walking or hiking in nature, offer a respite from the strains associated with those activities that require strong concentration. Stephen Kaplan and Mark G. Berman maintain that *directed attention* is "more reliant on...frontal and parietal cognitive control structures whereas involuntary attention is less so" (46). The persistent use of *directed attention* may adversely affect one's *executive function* – a set of neurologically-based cognitive skills that enable individuals to filter distractions and manage daily tasks, and *self-regulation* – a mechanism involving social behavior and the ability to make suitable decisions. According to Rita Bero, "any prolonged mental effort leads to fatigue"; however, "natural environments foster restoration from attentional fatigue because they hold non-taxing attention" (Bero 250). Neuroimaging data indicates that executive function and self-regulation share resources and that each is dependent on a finite resource, which suggests they can be depleted when overburdened, thus causing individuals to exhibit rash behavior, confusion, and irritability (Kaplan and Berman 43). Interacting with natural environments that inherently supply fascinating stimuli, make modest appeals to one's involuntary attention, which provides one's directed attention mechanisms with "a chance to replenish" (Berman, Jonides, and Kaplan 1208).

When Headley states that his brain is "over-wrought," he is describing a condition known as *directed attention fatigue*, a neurological experience produced by overuse of the brain's unconscious suppression of attention mechanisms. During directed attention, when intense concentration is needed, the brain actually attempts to block extraneous stimuli that are not pertinent to the activity in which one is engaged. Because several parts of the brain are involved in maintaining directed attention, relocating oneself to an environment wherein attention can be reflexive, spontaneous, and instinctive enables one's directed attention to decline, which in turn allows the brain to relax and ultimately facilitates the body's ability to recuperate. As Headley canoes along Raquette Lake, he ponders his emotions, the "gentle feelings" that "rise one after another" in an "indistinguishable throng," and the return of "strange memories long since buried" that come back with "overpowering freshness" (*Adirondack*, 229). He muses over the "great world of strife and toil" and its "fierce struggles for gain," all of which seem to Headley the "madness of the maniac" (230). In the wilderness, the "good" one forgets while living in civilization "returns," for, as Headley declares, "nature wakes up the dead divinity within...and rouses the soul to purer, nobler purposes" (230). Headley goes so far as to argue that the very air of the Adirondack's wilderness is "composed of different ingredients than that of the outer world, filling the cells of the lungs with a new substance, and sending a different arterial blood coursing through the system" (289-290).⁷

Environmental psychologists typically consider four factors that tend to make an environment restorative and therefore likely to contribute to a recuperative experience. The first is *being away*, which implies that a setting will be distinct, either physically or conceptually, from one's routine surroundings. The second factor, *extent*, can be found in wide-ranging environments such as those settings that encompass sufficient space to engage the mind and promote

exploration. Third, *compatibility* refers to how well a setting supports one's preferences and purpose in seeking out the environment. And, finally, *fascination* allows one to engage in effortless attention because the setting provides visually appealing images. Indeed, natural environments are generally fascinating and tend to create spontaneous responses in individuals.

In *Adirondack* Headley writes of the "hours of idleness" in which he indulges in the mountains, hours that provide his mind and body with much needed rest. But perhaps more important to his restorative experience are the unusual and fascinating aspects of the Adirondacks that Headley describes. For instance, Long Lake, "with its glittering head" (146) is one of the "most beautiful sheets of water" he had ever floated over, and "its frame-work of mountains becomes the glorious picture" (152). His view of Lake Champlain, "with its islands spread away as far as the eye could follow toward the Canadas," as well as the nearly thirty other lakes he discovers during his time in the mountains, make his "head swim in the wondrous vision" (62). The "heaven-piercing summits, and precipices of ice, and terrific gorges, and fearful passes," and the various ascents, such as on Mount Emmons, "which flings up its round head and giant form far above the blue range of hills that stretch on to the southeast" (218), all create a sense of awe in Headley.

The poetic images Headley provides clarify the conceptual significance of *being away*:

In the wilderness there is no formality in the expression of one's feelings. A man 'laughs when he's merry, / And sighs when he's sad,' without thinking or caring how it would appear in the saloon or grave assemblage (iii).

"When you first step from the crowded city into the centre of a vast wilderness," Headley writes, "the contrast its stillness presents to the hum and motion of busy life" and the "absence of all the bustle and activity you have been accustomed to makes you at first believe there is no sound, no motion there" (194). However, after some time away from the city, Headley's "sense of hearing" had apparently become so acute that "the wilderness never seems silent" (197). He frequently invokes images of the *extent* of "the unbroken wilderness...and succession of ragged mountains" (20), the "highest and most picturesque" of which "lie deep in the forest, where none but an experienced guide can carry you" (46). Travelling through the mountain wilderness is, for Headley, "a right kingly march," in which he rejoices in the "glorious woods, and the sense of freedom they bring" (115). One of Headley's reflections on his time in the wild encompasses all four factors that make up a restorative experience:

I love nature...I love the freedom of the wilderness and the absence of conventional forms there. I love the long stretch through the forest on foot, and the thrilling, glorious prospect from some hoary mountain top. I love it, and I know it is better for me than the thronged city, aye, better for soul and body both (167).

Because the mind is inherently embodied and thought is mostly unconscious, humans often employ abstract, metaphorical concepts as a way to comprehend and thus remember their physical environment. Headley portrays primeval nature in all her expressive metaphorical charm and terror throughout *Adirondack*. In one of his earliest letters, written as he travels up the Hudson River toward the Adirondacks thinking of "the broad, deep forest and rushing streams" that await him, Headley senses the metaphorical "chains of conventional life... fall[ing] off, link after link" (113). Later, he is awed by the absolute "terror in [the] great black eye" of a "noble" fish he catches" (26), and he expresses his admiration for Mount Tahawus in the central Adirondack region, comparing the mountain to King Saul who was "head and shoulders above all his brethren, with his round and naked head resting serenely in the heavens" (299). Headley acknowledges humans' dichotomous nature – the "savage," which he calls "man's normal [physical] state" (289), and the human mind. Humans are, according to Headley, "compelled every now and then to go back *towards*" that savage state, "if not *to* it, to recover the lost tone of both mind and body" in the natural world (289). The mountains, precipices, gorges, lakes and "fearful passes" of the Adirondacks are "like grand but indistinct visions on [his] memory" and have "become a part of [his] life" (182) that he will carry with him even after he leaves the mountains and returns to civilization.

As Headley sits "amid the purple mountains" and contemplates "emerging again into civilized life," he realizes that the "strange tumult" from which he has taken a temporary respite "has not ceased in his absence" (45). Despite his disconnection from it, the commotion of the world has persisted. However, Headley's remove from an urban environment into a mountainous wilderness and his subsequent return to civilization provide a mental cohesion that gives him the ability once again to be that "child in action," even after he leaves the woods. But it is his physical time in the Adirondacks and the creative act of writing about it that supply him with a variety of metaphorical concepts that enable him to reconnect socially when he returns to the city and the imaginative stimulus to rebuild cognitively an alternative wilderness retreat into which he (and thus his readers) are able to escape momentarily from the entanglements of urban life.

Headley's emphasis on the ineffable qualities of mountainous landscapes – especially when considered alongside environmental studies that validate the non-human world's ability to restore the body and mind – empowers and solidifies our own contemporary understanding of how the non-human relates to the ever-encroaching human. If nothing else, Headley's portrayal of the wilderness in *Adirondack* reminds contemporary readers that the "still small voice of nature is more impressive than her loudest thunder" (*Adirondack*, 182).

ENDNOTES

1. This number does not include the many pirated editions of *Adirondack* that surfaced throughout the nineteenth century.
2. It is interesting to note, too, that while von Frank and Wortham are correct in mentioning Headley's book as inspiration for Stillman's initial excursions to the Adirondacks, they erroneously refer to Headley's book as having a "Thoreauvian title," when, in truth, it is Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, published five years after *Adirondack; or, Life in the Woods*, that bears a 'Headlian' title.
3. See Janice Simon, pp. 104-108, for a comprehensive treatment of the painting's "triadic point of view" and how its "organization and action" are governed by the "spherical vision" of Emerson's transparent eyeball.
4. Emerson wrote this poem shortly after the trip to Follensby, but it was not published until 1867.
5. Headley was related by marriage to Eliphalet Knott, Union College President (1804-1866). According to Headley, his mother and "Dr. Nott's first wife" were cousins (Joel Tyler Headley, *Passages from the Correspondence and Other Papers of Rufus W. Griswold*, 210).
6. Of note, James's father, Henry James, Sr., also attended Union College, 1828-1830.
7. In 1899, physician Max E. Witte provided contemporaneous corroboration for Headley's claims when he asserted it is "psychological fact" that when an individual uses attention mechanisms, "a certain psychic center...[is] set in action, and a corresponding brain area is flushed with arterial blood" (115). "Mental operations," argues Witte, "depend on underlying cerebral activities," which in turn rely on "circulation and an increased supply of blood" (115); it is the "great majority," who experience the benefits of indirect attention "only [by]...delving into the soil" (116).

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